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IMPACT OF PARENTAL VISITATION ON THE
BEHAVIOR OF FOSTER CHILDREN

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Tricia Lynn Haggerty

June 2006


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ABSTRACT

This study examined how parental visits impact the child's behavior after a visit. A foster parents' perception of the behavior was used and the foster parents were asked to complete a Behavioral Symptom Checklist regarding the foster child's behavior following a visit. Data was collected from 44 foster parents and the results showed that children who were removed for neglect were more likely to exhibit certain behaviors. Certain behaviors were impacted by the visit with the mother. The need for procedures and additional training for foster parents is also discussed. A recommendation for social work practice includes the need for educating the biological parents on the effects of the visits on the child's behavior. Research on the topic of visitation, parental visits and the effects on attachment need to be continued.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services for the support and allowing me to conduct this study. I would especially like to thank Sally Richter and Mary Alice Grosser for their supervision during my internship and the support and knowledge they have given me. I would like to thank the Social Work Department at Cal State University San Bernardino and especially Dr. Janet Chang for her advisement, support, and patience in completing this research project. Finally, I would like to thank the foster parents who took the time to complete the questionnaires and for the valuable contribution that was given for the study.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research project to the people who have been there to support me with their unconditional love and continuous encouragement as I reach this goal in my life. Especially, my family and God, without you in my life, I would not have had the courage or strength to complete the program and move a step closer to achieving my career goals. Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to all foster parents who open their homes and hearts to these needy children and help make the world a better place for everyone.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses foster care's goals of protecting children. It also looks at the importance of visitation not only on the reunification process, but more importantly, the attachment and improving the relationships between the biological parent and their child. There is a discussion about the need for agencies to develop a policy on how to deal with negative visits and canceled visits.

Problem Statement

According to the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA, 2001) there were approximately 542,000 children in foster care, 52% male and 48% female. The children were in the following age groups: younger than 1 year (4.0%), age 1-5 (24%), 6-10 (24%), 11-15 (30%), 16-18 (17%), and over 18 (2%). As can be seen, with the exception of the youngest and oldest, all age groups are almost equally represented. The permanency plans for these children consist of either being reunified with parents or caretakers (44%), adoption (22%), or long term foster care (8%). The remaining children are living with other

relatives, are in guardianship or emancipated, or did not have case plan goals established.

The foster care system's main goal is to provide these children a safe, temporary place, but for many children as the statistics show, foster care becomes a long-lasting situation with multiple movements. In the past, the child welfare system's goal was to keep the family together or help reunify the family quickly. In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 105-89) made this goal second and the safety of the child became the main goal. It also shortened the time a child can be in the system before the parent's rights are terminated (Leathers, 2002). With these children stuck in the system moving from family to family, it is not surprising that they deal with attachment and other issues.

Foster care, even though it is supposed to be temporary, to be successful for the child, it has to be positive and help the child with many issues, especially attachment issues he or she has brought with them. If a child has a positive foster care experience and then has visitations with the biological parent(s), this can lead to what is called loyalty conflict for the child. Basically, the child is torn between his or her love and

loyalty for the biological parent, even though they have hurt them, and the foster parent, who offers them protection and support. This in turn may affect the child's attachment with the foster parents and the biological parents. This is where visitation can be helpful. Its benefits include allowing children to express feelings, improve their relationship with their foster parents, and deal with their fears of separation (Cantos & Gries, 1997). It also "gives both placed children and foster parents continuing opportunities to see the parents realistically instead of maintaining irrational notions of them" (Cantos & Gries, 1997, p. 309). In turn, it can help the biological parent see that their child is safe and that they themselves do still have a major influence on their child and that they are still an important part of the child's life.

The idea of attachment and how it affects all aspects of a child's life has been studied for years and research needs to continue. If a child does not establish secure attachments during their childhood, it will not only affect the child's current relationships, but also his or her adult relationships. A child that is removed from their home has a greater chance of suffering loss of

attachment due to the removal of the caregiver, no matter how much the caregiver was abusing or neglecting the child. McWey stated (2000) "thus, a child in foster care who is not able to continue attachment relationships may be unable to form attachments with others" (p. 92). Once a child is removed and placed in the foster care system, attachment issues need to be addressed. There are many issues that affect the child and his or her attachment to the biological parent, and one of these is parental visitation.

Haight, Black, Mangelsdorf, Giorgio, Tata, Schoppe, and Szewczyk (2002) stated, "organized visits are considered so critical to the effort to reunite families that P.L. 96-272 (Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980) explicitly requires their inclusion in family preservation efforts" (p. 173). Social workers have to do everything in their power to provide the parents with what they need to be able to visit with their children and then also assist with positive visitations. For visits to occur is not all on the social worker's shoulders; the ultimate responsibility falls on the parent's shoulders to follow the court's orders to visit with their children. For many children, the

anticipation of a visit is replaced with the reality of a bad visit or worse, a cancelled visit. When this happens, it is up to the foster family to deal with the child afterwards. In some cases visitation may not be in the best interest of the child and this has to be carefully considered on an individual basis by the social worker.

When a parent or the agency cancels a visit with the child, it not only has a negative effect for the parent, but the child is left with disappointment and confusion as to why the visit did not occur. Then, it is up to the foster parents to deal with the child's emotions, which may lead to disruptive behavior, and try to help him or her work through those emotions. Some foster parents have siblings and when visits are canceled or don't go as smoothly as they should, they have their hands full and may feel overwhelmed. With proper training, foster parents can help these children deal with these emotions and behaviors. At the same time, the social workers and the agency can work with the biological parents to make the visits better. One way is to help parents see how beneficial it is if they allow their children to have feelings towards the foster parents.

Agencies, in this case San Bernardino Department of Children's Services, need to have a written policy on how to deal with visits that are canceled so the welfare of the child can be improved and the goals of the agency met. Currently, the guidelines include scheduling the visit with the biological parent(s) and then contacting the foster parent(s) so they can bring the child to the office. There is usually no contact or between the biological parent and the social worker or no confirmation call regarding if the visit will continue as scheduled until it either happens or is canceled. Sometimes, a visit is canceled at the last minute and the foster parent has already brought the child to the office. Trying to explain to a young child that his or her visit, that he or she has looked forward to all week long, with his or her parent is not going to happen is one of the most difficult things a social worker or foster parent has to do. Also, the biological parents need to be educated about how much the visits not only help them to be reunified more quickly with their children but also how much the visits benefit them and the children by improving their attachment. After the

visits occur, the behavior of the child needs to be observed, acknowledged, and dealt with in a positive way.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the location where these visits take place. Most visits are at the agency's office where parents are told to have a seat in a room and interact with their child while the social worker observes. Other visits are at the foster parent's home, which seldom occurs for confidential reasons, while other visits may be at the biological parent's home, and still other visits are conducted at a fast food restaurant. All these locations are not the best place to be conducting visits for different reasons. Conducting visits at the agency's office "may exacerbate tension and stress felt by the family, whereas visiting at foster families' homes may cause tension between foster parents and biological parents and intensify feelings of anxiety over allegiances for the children" (McWey & Mullis, 2004, p. 293).

To avoid the tension among all parties and make the visits more productive, some states utilize Supervised Family Visitation Centers (FVC), which can provide a safe environment to conduct the visits and have trained personnel to observe the visits and report back to the

social worker and the courts (McWey & Mullis, 2004). This may eliminate the social worker's need to supervise the visits and be freed to focus other issues. With high caseloads, social workers need all the assistance they can get. Also, the use of these centers could possibly extend the visits longer than the average hour as long as the biological parent shows up and the visits go smoothly. A child that only sees his or her parent for an hour every other week, is only seeing that parent for a total of 26 hours; that is only a little over a day in a year's time. How can a child re-establish any attachment with a parent that they visit with under these conditions? This would not work in every case and the parents have to decide if they are going to abide by the court's orders and make the visits successful. In most cases, if visits can be handled successfully and consistently, it will benefit everyone involved, especially the children.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to help all who are involved in the well being of children that come in contact of Child Protective Services, and to assess the

importance of establishing and maintaining quality of visits. Knowing how these visitations affect children's behavior will not only help the social workers and the agencies in determining what is best for the child so the most beneficial services can be provided, but also reunite these families quicker. Also, it may be beneficial to show the parents of these children how much they influence their children's lives even when they are not around them every day. It may also help the foster parents determine the specific needs of the individual child and help the child progress through the system positively. After all, that is why the foster care system exists.

A questionnaire asking about the child's behavior after a visit was the basis for this study, which followed a quantitative approach in the way the data was collected and analyzed. The study followed the principles of quantitative research in many ways. First, the variables that determine the child's behavior will be measured objectively. Second, the foster parent completed the survey and since they are around the child every day, they were the best person to look at the child's behavior. Also, they would know if any differences in the

child's behavior could be linked to the quality of the visit or the canceled visit. The foster parent's ability to analyze the child's behavior objectively hopefully reduces uncertainty.

Using the behavior symptom checklist will allow other researchers to duplicate this study and it followed standardized procedures so this study will be accepted and usable to help improve the agency's services. This is an applied study in that it will attempt to show how visits, good or bad, scheduled or canceled, does affect the child's behavior. It will also attempt to show the need of solutions on improving the visits for the benefit of the welfare of the child in the foster care system.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The significance of the project for social work practice is that the benefits of visitation of children in the foster care system with his or her biological parent(s) has a major impact on the reunification process. The first goal in child welfare is the safety of the child, however, at the same time, limiting the time a child spends in the system is of importance. The ultimate goal is to reunify families and this process includes

rebuilding the relationship between the child and parent. This can be accomplished by visitation, yet there are no policies written on how to handle bad visits or canceled visits.

Children are already at a vulnerable stage in their life when they become wards of the court and then to get them excited over an anticipated visit just to have it canceled because the parent forgot or did not make it. Then, not taking the time to explain or talk to the child about their feelings can have the same impact as the parent missing the visit. Some type of intervention is needed that helps these children overcome their feelings of neglect and also that teaches the parent how the canceled visits effected their child.

The phase of the generalist intervention process that study benefited is the implementing stage since it assessed the need for a policy to be put into place to assist the social workers to make the visitations more productive for the reunification goal. This study looked at how parental visitation impacts the foster child's behavior, sometimes for hours or days following a visit, and the role of the agency in improving visits.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There has been much research on attachment theory and how it affects a child's relationships with others over their lifetime. What the research has attempted to study and needs to continue to study is the relationship between attachment and visitation. Children in foster care need visitation from their biological parents to maintain their relationship and attachment. This chapter will look at the relevant literature on the subject of parental visitation and how it affects children. Also, what needs to be done to improve visitations.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Attachment theory easily can be linked to foster children due to the child's relationship with the parent being strained upon removal from the home; this can be improved with visitation. There are many articles that discuss attachment and visitation. McWey (2000) found, "there are factors that influence attachment.... These include continuity, stability, and mutuality. Continuity involves constancy.... Stability refers to the

environment.... Mutuality as 'the interactions between both the parent and the child which reinforce the experience that each is important'" (p. 95).

Another article discussed how the parent-child attachment relationship affects the visitation. Especially when reunification is the goal for the child and parent, "experience is necessary for the development of attachment relationships, and without regular and frequent visiting, foster care can seriously and negatively affect parent-child attachment relationships" (Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003, p. 198). Browne and Moloney (2002) stated, "regular contact is essential if the child is to maintain healthy attachments to a birth family to which s/he is likely to return" (p. 44).

For any child, healthy attachments originate by forming strong relationships between the child and the caregivers. For foster children, the level of attachment can affect the number of placements the child endures. A study concluded that children who have maintained strong attachments to the biological parent, will have positive relationships with the foster parents which may result in fewer placements and less time in the system (McWey & Mullis, 2004; Canto & Gries, 1997). Fewer placements

result in a more positive experience in foster care. Secure attachments also lead to less behavior issues and help the child form positive relationships throughout their life. Parental visitation helps with forming these strong attachments with the family and others (McWey, 2000; McWey & Mullis, 2004; Browne & Moloney, 2002).

Effects on Child's Behavior

It has been noted that foster parents complain about the child's behavior following a visit. Unfortunately, there have not been many studies that look at this issue. The studies that have been conducted conclude that there can be other factors that affect the child's behavior. On the other hand, visiting may cause painful feelings that the child has repressed and to cope with these feelings, the child acts out with disruptive behavior (Cantos & Gries, 1997). Visits can cause the parent and child to deal with feelings of reunion and separation (Haight et al., 2003).

A study found that behavior of children that had visits compared to children that did not have visits would differ based on the type of behavior and the child's level of attachment. Another influence on the

behavior can be the child's age and length of time in placement (Cantos & Gries, 1997). This study also concluded that visiting may be the cause of the child's behavior problems and that further studies need to be conducted.

Browne and Moloney (2002) interviewed social workers and analyzed their responses regarding visits. In a few instances, the social worker noticed the biological parent's behavior or reactions during the visit had a negative effect on the child. This led to the foster parent to deal with the child's behavior afterwards.

Effects on the Reunification Process

All the research on this topic has one thing in common; they all agree on the importance of visitation in the reunification process. The research shows how important visitation is to the child's well being and how it, for the most part, benefits the children as well as the parents. Children who are visited more have a better chance to be reunited with their parents than those children who are not visited at all (Cantos & Gries, 1977; Proch & Howard, 1986). Davis, Landsverk, Newton, and Ganger (1996) found that "parental visiting is a

powerful factor in the decision to reunify a foster child" (p. 377). This is because the children can continue to build and improve their attachment and their relationships with their parents. Perkins and Ansay (1998) stated, "visitation provides continual contact between the child and parent, and provides an opportunity to facilitate the healing of the child's emotional burdens while coping with parental separation" (p. 256). This is further supported by Loar (1998) "the visiting plan can become the key intervention to nurture the parent-child relationship and give reunification a fair chance" (p. 42).

Unsuccessful Visits

Unfortunately, sometimes visits are unsuccessful and this may cause more damage to the child. Parents may cause this by not showing up for the visits or by making promises about the family reuniting sooner than is going to happen. The number of visitations that are completed or canceled is more important than quality when it comes to the bonding of the child with the parent (Ansay, 2001). Not only does the child have to bond with the parent, but the parent also has to bond (Ansay, 2001).

Also, how the social workers and foster parents handle the situation before and after the visit can cause the child to be hurt or confused (Browne & Moloney, 2002). Browne and Moloney also stated "the impact of visiting depends on a variety of connecting factors including the natural parents' involvement, their relationship with the foster parents and how quickly the agency intervenes (2002, p. 43).

Improving Visitations

To help the parents improve their visits with their children, agencies have to remember that the parent may lack the simple ability of knowing how to enjoy their children's company (Loar, 1998). Loar stated, "treatment plans describe discipline and limit settings as alternatives to corporal punishment, but fall short of confronting the more basic need for a positive and mutually enjoyable relationship" (1998, p. 42). There is a need for policies to be put in place to help improve the visitations between these parents and their children. Scheduling plays a major part in the frequency of visits (Proch & Howard, 1986).

The location of the visits and encouraging parents to participate in areas of their child's life influences the frequency of visits (Leathers, 2002). The study discovered that when a parent is allowed to visit in his or her home, foster home, participate in his or her child's school functions, and participate in the case reviews, they visit more frequently and consistently (Leathers, 2002).

Another issue is the case plans and how they need to be individualized regarding visits. Proch and Howard (1986) stated, "visiting plans have little direct connection to the needs of individual children and families. Rather, they seem to be a function of the social worker's style of standard practices in an agency" (p. 180).

This is further supported by Davis et al. (1996) in his finding "using parental visiting to promote change of parent-child interaction requires major investment of the caseworker's time and ingenuity in planning, monitoring, and evaluating the visits" (p. 378). Realistically with the high caseloads, it is impossible to imagine the social workers having the time to implement the visiting plans. Especially when they have to provide the

transportation for the children to and from the visit. Knowing how vital these visits are for the children, the agencies persevere. Also, educating the parents on the importance of these visits not only fulfills the requirements of the case plan for reunification, but also helps build the relationship they once had with their children and to continue to build for the future (McWey & Mullis, 2004).

Summary

These articles have shown the importance of visitation and how visits affect the attachment between the biological parents and their children that are involved in the Child Welfare System. There is also a need for policies and for additional foster parent training to handle situations when the visits do not go well or are canceled. There is not enough research on the need to establish policies and procedures or the impact on the behavior. Only one article pointed out the simple needs of the biological parent that is usually overlooked by the social workers and the foster parents. The issues that the articles have discussed need to be looked at by the agencies and policies need to be implemented to

improve the visitations for these children and the
parents.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter outlines the procedure the data was collected, the sampling size, and how the confidentiality of the participants was completed. Also, what type of analysis was conducted and the variables that were included in the study.

Study Design

This study's purpose was to explore the link between visitations and the behavior of the child following the visit. The research method used was a quantitative approach because of the type of questionnaire that was used. It was chosen for the reason that the surveys could be mailed out to the large group of foster families and they could remain anonymous and complete the survey when it was convenient for them. The study was based on an explanatory design since it looked at whether or not the visits caused good or bad behavior.

A limitation of the study design was that since the foster parents completed the survey, it was based on their perceptions of the child's behavior. Hopefully, the

foster parent's experience made them aware of the possible behavior problems a child can have due to being in the foster care system.

The research question is how does parental visitation impact the foster child's behavior. The hypothesis is that it does have a major impact on the child's behavior. The study also looked at if there was a difference between the children that were placed with a non-relative and those placed with relatives.

Sampling

The sample consisted of 44 county licensed foster parents from San Bernardino County. There were no age requirements for the foster parents to participate in the study. A mailing list was obtained by Department of Children's Services and surveys were mailed out to each foster parent listed on the mailing list. There was a variety of age, ethnicity, marital status, and education level questions regarding the foster parents. The foster parents were asked to answer the questions about foster children between ages 5-12 and for only one child.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collected for this study was a questionnaire completed by the foster parents. The study looked at the types of behaviors that children might express and was looking for any correlation of the behaviors, internal and external, to the person the child had visits with. The behavior symptom checklist listed 30 types of behaviors that were measured by the frequency of occurrence with a three-point scale (0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true) (Appendix A).

The foster parents also answered demographic information regarding their gender, age, ethnicity, religious background, education, marital status, employment, and relation to the child. The next questions were in regards to the foster child and asked the same questions for gender, age, ethnicity, religious background, and education level. In addition, questions regarding length of time in the home, reason for removal, if the child has visitation with family and with whom, and number of previous placements.

This questionnaire has been used before to look at the link between the behavioral problems of foster

children and their insecure attachments (Espinoza & Ramirez, 2002). The validity of the questionnaire is strong since the questions focus on the behaviors a child may have after a visit. These questions may also assist the agency in determining if the attachment between the child and the biological parent is being maintained or if it has been severed. If this is happening, and the parent shows improvement, the reunification process can move along successfully.

Being culturally sensitive is important and needs to be addressed, especially when dealing with such a sensitive subject and vulnerable population. The questions were developed to focus on the behaviors that need to be addressed if they arise. The questions reflected behavior that any child could demonstrate and the demographic page, the questions regarding ethnicity covered a variety of cultures and allowed the parent to choose other if they desired.

One of the limitations of the data collection is that the child may be demonstrating the behaviors anyways without the visits being the reason. If the foster parents are unable to determine the child's behavior and

separate normal behaviors and behaviors effected by the visit, the survey will not be answered correctly.

This could occur especially since the visits are only for an hour; it may be difficult to determine if the visit has any reflection on the child's behavior. If a child tends to act up during the visit and continues at the foster home, it may have nothing to with the quality of visit, but just the mood of the child. On the other hand, no visit is going to happen without problems and this is where the parents have to show that they can handle the conflict without being abusive. Also, the foster parents have to be able to handle the child after the visit and deal with the behaviors.

Procedures

The data was gathered by mailing a survey to all foster parents that were listed on a mailing list provided by Department of Children's Services (DCS). DCS provided envelopes and postage paid returned envelopes and 564 surveys were mailed out. The surveys that were returned were mailed to DCS and had the researcher's name on the returned mail. The surveys were only opened by the researcher and kept in a secure place.

The foster parents were asked to complete the survey shortly after a visit. The collection of data ended one month after the surveys were mailed out.

Protection of Human Subjects

The confidentiality and anonymity of the foster parents were upheld in the utmost secure fashion. The participants did not at any time; write his or her name on any forms. A number system was used to enter the data collection. The participants received an informed consent, which they only marked with an X (See Appendix B). They were also explained they could withdraw at any time and that there would be no penalty should they choose not to participate. The participants were also given a debriefing statement with the name of the researcher and the advisor and her phone#. They were also given resources if they needed any assistance (See Appendix C).

Data Analysis

For this study, a quantitative approach was used to determine the impact of parental visitation on foster children. These visits that occur weekly at the same scheduled time and day are a vital part in the

reunification of the family among the other requirements that are given by the court. How these visits impact the behavior of the child also needs to be taken into consideration in this reunification process.

The relationship between the variables will be a correlation because if the visit goes well and the child's behavior is good, the visits will continue each week. Both the child and the parent will get a positive feedback from these visits and the reunification case will be change to a family maintenance case.

A multivariate analysis was used and the behaviors were compared to the person the child visited with. Also, if the child's reason for removal had an impact on his or her behavior and the relation to the caregiver was compared.

Summary

This study explains how parental visitations impact the behavior of the foster child and how this can affect the reunification process and also the child's experience in the foster care system. The sample consisted of foster parents who answered a quantitative survey that inquire about the child's behavior upon returning from the visit.

A multivariate analysis was used to link the behaviors to see if they correlated with the visit.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The results of the study and the findings from the questionnaires are discussed. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were run on the demographic information on the foster parent and child. Chi-square t-test and independent sample t-test were conducted and the results are discussed.

Presentation of the Findings

The sample group for this study was San Bernardino County licensed foster parents. There were 564 questionnaires mailed out, however, only 44 questionnaires were returned and used for this study. The caregivers consisted of all females and one male, ranging from age 25-77 with a mean age of 47.95. The majority of the caregivers were married (65.9%), while 11.4% were divorced, 11.4% widowed, 9.19% single, and 2.3% other. Over 36% of the respondents were African-American, 34.1% Caucasian, 25% Latino/Hispanic, and 4.5% other. Nearly 39% of the respondents were Christian, 31.8% Catholic, 15.9% Protestant, 11.4% other, and 2.3% had no religious

affiliation. In terms of the caregivers' education level, 31.8% attended some college, 27.3% graduated college, 22.7% graduated from high school or received a GED, 9.1% earned a master's degree or doctorate degree, 4.5% had some high school, 4.5% had less than high school. Over 54% of the caregivers were employed and 40.9% were not employed. The great majority of caregivers (88.1%) reported they did not have any relation to the child, 7.1% grandparent, 2.4% aunt/uncle, 2.4% other. The frequency distribution of these demographic variables is summarized in Table 1.

The sample of the foster children consisted of 23 males and 19 females between the ages of less than 1 and 17 years old with a mean age of 7.73. The foster children's ethnicity were represented by 35.7% Latino/Hispanic, 31.0% Caucasian, 19.0% African-American, 4.8% Native American, and 9.5% other. In regards to the foster child's religious affiliation, 41.5% selected no religion, while 34.1% were Christian, 14.6% selected other, 7.3% Catholic, and 2.4% Protestant.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Demographic
Variables of Foster Parents

Variable	Frequency (n = 44)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	43	97.7
Male	1	2.3
Age		
25-41	15	35.7
42-53	13	31.0
54-77	14	33.3
Marital Status		
Single	4	9.1
Married	29	65.9
Divorced	5	11.4
Widow(ed)	5	11.4
Other	1	2.3
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	15	34.1
African-American	16	36.4
Latino/Hispanic	11	25.0
Other	2	4.5
Religion		
Protestant	7	15.9
Catholic	14	31.8
Christian	17	38.6
Other	5	11.4
No religion	1	2.3
Education		
Less than high school	2	4.5
Some high school	2	4.5
High school graduate or GED	10	22.7
Some college	14	31.8
College graduate	12	27.3
Master's or doctorate degree	4	9.1
Relation to child		
No relation	37	88.1
Grandparent	3	7.1
Aunt/Uncle	1	2.4
Other family member	1	2.4
Length of time in Placement (months)		
6 or less	14	33.3
7-19	14	33.4
20 or more	14	33.3

Education level of the foster child was between no education and eighth grade, with 61.5% at the elementary level, 15.4% at the middle school level, and 23.1% at no education level. Over 59% of the reason for removal was due to neglect, while 25% were due to physical abuse, 25% due to abandonment, and 25% due to positive drug screening at birth, and 11.4% were sexual abuse. The reason for the percentages not equaling 100% is because some children were removed for more than one reason. Over 47% of the foster children had one or less previous placements, 37.5% had two to three placements, and 15.0% had four or more placements.

The caregivers were asked if the foster children had visits with his or her family and 74.7% did have visits while 25.6% did not. When asked whom the child visits with, 43.2% were reported to have visits with mother, 25% with extended family members, 20.5% with siblings, 15.9% with both mother and father, and 6.8% with father. The groups overlap due to the children could be visiting with more than one member. Demographic characteristics of the foster children are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Demographic Variables for Foster Children

Variable	Frequency (n = 44)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	19	43.2
Male	23	52.3
Age		
6 and younger	14	34.1
7-9	14	34.1
10 and older	13	31.7
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	13	31.0
African-American	8	19.0
Latino/Hispanic	15	35.7
Native American	2	4.8
Other	4	9.5
Religion		
Protestant	1	2.4
Catholic	3	7.3
Christian	14	34.1
Other	6	14.6
No religion	17	41.5
Education level		
No education	9	23.1
Kindergarten	3	7.7
First	4	10.3
Second	7	17.9
Third	1	2.6
Fourth	4	10.3
Fifth	3	7.7
Sixth	2	5.1
Seventh	2	5.1
Eighth	4	10.3
Reason for removal		
Physical abuse	11	25.0
Sexual abuse	5	11.4
Neglect abuse	26	59.1
Abandonment	11	25.0
Positive drug screening at birth	11	25.0
Number of previous Placements		
One or less	19	47.5
2-3	15	37.5
4 or more	6	15.0

Variable	Frequency (n = 44)	Percentage (%)
Visits with family		
Yes	32	74.4
No	11	25.6
Whom do they visit with		
Mother	19	43.2
Father	3	6.8
Mother and Father	7	15.9
Siblings	9	20.5
Extended family	11	25.0

Chi-square t-test was conducted to compare the child's gender to the behavior displayed after a visit. The only behavior compared to gender that was statistically significant was cries a lot, $t = 7.28$, $df = 2$, $p = .026$. There was a close significance between gender and the behavior clings to adults; however, it was not statistically significant.

Chi-square t-tests were also conducted to compare the child's behavior to whether or not the child had a visit and with whom. There was significance when the child visited with the mother to five behaviors. There was a significant relationship between the child visiting with mother and the behavior clings to adults, $t = 8.62$, $df = 2$, $p = .013$. There was a significant relationship between the child visiting with mother and the behavior cries a lot, $t = 7.38$, $df = 2$, $p = .025$. There was also a

significant relationship between the visit with the mother and the behavior cruelty, bullying, meanness, $t = 8.65$, $df = 2$, $p = .013$. Next, there was a significant relationship between the visit with mother and behavior disobedient at home, $t = 12.88$, $df = 2$, $p = .002$. The fifth significant relationship was between the child visiting the mother and the behavior physically attacks people, $t = 9.66$, $df = 2$, $p = .008$. For the behavior withdrawn, not involved with others, there was a close significance; however, it was not statistically significant.

Chi-square t-tests were conducted to compare the child's behavior to if the child had visits with other family members. There were no significant differences between the child's behavior and whether or not the child visited with the father, mother and father, siblings, or extended family.

Independent samples t-tests were then conducted to compare the reason for removal to the child's behavior. Between all of the reasons for removal, the reason of neglect was the only one that was statistically significant to the child's behavior, $t = 3.28$, $df = 42$, $p = .002$.

The respondents were asked to describe any strange behavior, strange ideas, trouble sleeping, and any other problems. There was not any statistical significance with these specific behaviors. There were recurring responses of bedwetting, nightmares, and worrying about or dealing with parental issues.

Summary

Even though the sample size was small and the hypothesis was not supported, the study did show that parental visits, especially the visits with the mother, do have an impact on some of the behaviors that the child may display after a visit. The study also showed there are other influences on the foster children's behavior, for example, the gender of the child and the reason for removal. The foster parent's perception of the foster child's behavior following the visit had an influential impact on the study and the outcome.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter gives a general description of the sample used and highlights the findings of the study. The limitations of the study are discussed and suggestions are offered to resolve these limitations. Recommendations for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

Discussion

The sample for this study consisted of 44 foster parents and 44 foster children. The sample size was relatively small considering 564 questionnaires were mailed out, with a return of 76. Only 44 were used due to 16 returned as undeliverable and another 16 were returned unanswered, which left an 8% response rate.

The foster parents that responded were middle age females and one male. The parents' ethnicity was distributed among African-Americans, Caucasians, and Latino/Hispanics and the religious groups of Christian, Catholic, and Protestant represented the religious group. The majority of the foster parents were married, employed, and had attended college.

The sample size for the foster children consisted of 44 young children. The children's ethnicity was Latino/Hispanic, Caucasian, and African American and majority had no religion background. This could have been due to the age of the child and the religious background not known to the foster parent. Majority of the foster children were in elementary school.

The findings of the sample size included that the foster parents group included highly educated individuals with a religious background. A major of the foster children were removed for neglect, had three or fewer previous placements, and are placed with a non-relative. Majority of the foster children had visits with his or her mother, followed by extended family members, and siblings.

Regarding the behaviors of the children following the visit, the findings include that there was a significance regarding gender of the child to the behavior cries a lot. Comparing males and females there is a distinction between the distributions between the categories. For the males, they were listed either under the not true category or the very true/often true

category, whereas, the females are more evenly distributed between the three categories.

Comparing the child's behavior to the person they visit with, the findings conclude that there is no one person that affects all behaviors. However, there were certain behaviors that were affected by the mother's visit. The behaviors were: clings to adults, cries a lot, cruelty/bullying/meanness, disobedient at home, and physically attacks people and these were impacted by the visit with the mother. This could be based on since most children are removed from and visit with their mother. The behaviors that were displayed by the children were external instead of internal behaviors. This could be for reasons of the desire for immediate attention from the caregiver and since external behaviors are more noticeable, the child would receive immediate response. Even if the response is negative, the child has received the caregiver's attention and this may be something the child has desired.

Another finding was the affect of the reason for removal had on the child's behavior and even though this was not part of the hypothesis, it was an interesting finding. The reason of removal for neglect had the

highest percentage and this was the most common reason for removal. There was also a significant relationship between neglect and the behavior of the child. This could be based on since neglect is when the parent is not meeting the child's physical or emotional needs. The child enters the foster care system with the desire to have these needs met by the foster parent. Upon visiting with the parents, especially the parent that neglected the child, may bring out feelings of resentment towards the parents and instead of acting out during the visit, the child acts out when they return to the foster home. This concept is supported by previous research that conducted studies on the effects of parental visitation.

The research question that parental visitation does impact the foster children's behavior was not supported by this study. However, analyzing the results it can be concluded that foster children's behavior is impacted by visits in some way. There are other factors that can impact the children's behavior other than parental visitation. Other factors can include age of child, number of placements, level of adjustment the child is at with the foster parent, and the type of behavior. This

finding has been supported in past studies that conducted research regarding the same question.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study was the small sample size and its impact on the results of the study. A larger sample size may have produced different results with a possibility of the hypothesis supported. Another limitation was the type of questions that were asked. There should have been questions regarding how often the foster child visited with his or her parents and/or family since the quantity of visits can also influence the behavior. Also a question regarding if a visit was scheduled but canceled and see if that had an effect on the child's behavior.

A qualitative survey might have been more successful since questions could be asked based on each child's behavior. Interviewing foster parents would allow the researcher to obtain clarification on any questions and also control the sample size and focus on certain age groups of the foster children.

Recommendations for Social Work
Practice, Policy and Research

Visitation between the biological parents and their children while they are in the foster care system is so important to the reunification process. It is so vital that it is usually included in the case plan and encouraged by social workers. Visitation helps both parents and the child deal with separation issues and the attachment issues. Knowing the impact of parental visitation on the behavior of the children can assist social workers from Department of Children's Services or foster family agencies with supporting the biological and foster parents. It can open the lines of communication between the foster parents and the biological parents to help the child deal with any issues or feelings they may have regarding the visits or their relationship with the parent. If a parent is made aware of how much the visit or the cancellation affects their child, the parent might have a different perspective on his or her case.

Knowing how the visits or lack of visits affect the child's behavior shows how important it is to have a policy regarding more training for foster parents. It would not only benefit the children, but also the foster

parent because it would help them deal with the many issues that the child brings back with them following a visit. Training should include advice on dealing with attachment issues and how important attachment is to a child and dealing with separation and loss issues.

Research has been completed on attachment issues; however, more research needs to be completed on this topic. There are many different approaches to the topic of visitation that it allows the researcher to determine the best way.

Conclusions

Even though the sample size that was used in this study was small, there were a few significant differences founded. It was analyzed that parental or other family member's visits with the foster child does impact the child's behavior in a way. The behaviors were compared to whom the child visited and it was proved that there were significant differences depending on the behavior and the visit with the mother. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future research, policy, and additional foster parent training were discussed. Overall, this study shows above all the importance of

maintaining ongoing communication and support between the biological parent, foster parent, and the foster care system.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

Behavioral Symptom Checklist For Children Ages 5-12

Below is a list of items that describe children and youth's behavior after a **most recent visit or a visit within the current month**. Please circle the **2** if the item is **very true or often true** of the child. Circle the **1** if the item is **somewhat or sometimes true** of the child. If the item is **not true** of the child, circle the **0**.

Please answer all items as well as you can, even if some do not seem to apply to your foster child.

Please answer for only one foster child and focus on that child's behavior throughout the survey.

Please answer for a child between the ages of 5-12. Your responses will remain confidential.

0 = Not True (as far as you know)

1 = Somewhat or Sometimes True

2 = Very True or Often True

- 0 1 2 (1) Acts too young for his/her age
- 0 1 2 (2) Clings to adults or too dependent
- 0 1 2 (3) Cries a lot
- 0 1 2 (4) Cruel to animals
- 0 1 2 (5) Cruelty, bullying, or meanness to others
- 0 1 2 (6) Demands a lot of attention
- 0 1 2 (7) Destroys his/her own things
- 0 1 2 (8) Destroys things that belong to his/her family
- 0 1 2 (9) Disobedient at home
- 0 1 2 (10) Disobedient at school
- 0 1 2 (11) Gets in many fights
- 0 1 2 (12) Impulsive or acts without thinking
- 0 1 2 (13) Lying or cheating
- 0 1 2 (14) Nightmares
- 0 1 2 (15) Too fearful or anxious

- 0 1 2 (16) Physically attacks people
- 0 1 2 (17) Runs away from home
- 0 1 2 (18) Sets fire
- 0 1 2 (19) Steals at home
- 0 1 2 (20) Steals outside the home
- 0 1 2 (21) Strange behavior (describe): _____
- 0 1 2 (22) Strange ideas (describe): _____
- 0 1 2 (23) Swearing or obscene language
- 0 1 2 (24) Temper tantrums or hot temper
- 0 1 2 (25) Threatens people
- 0 1 2 (26) Trouble sleeping (describe): _____
- 0 1 2 (27) Unhappy, sad, or depressed
- 0 1 2 (28) Withdrawn, doesn't get involved with others
- 0 1 2 (29) Worries
- 0 1 2 (30) Please write in any problems your child has that were not listed above

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

You are being asked to participate in a study that will assess the impact of parental visitation on your foster child's behavior. The study is being conducted by Tricia Lynn Haggerty, MSW student, under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, faculty advisor. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Subcommittee of the Institutional Review Board at the California State University, San Bernardino.

It will take approximately 20 to 40 minutes of your time and you will be asked questions regarding you and your foster child's background and your foster child's behavior following a visit. All responses will be kept confidential, as your name will never appear on or be associated with this study. The study is purely for the purpose of measuring group responses and will not identify you individually. There are no foreseeable risks except you may feel distress answering some of the questions. If this does occur, you may contact the agencies listed in the debriefing statement.

Please be advised that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty should you choose not to participate in the study, and the agency will not know whether or not you participated.

Thank you for your time and efforts in providing this beneficial information on how parental visitations impact foster children's behavior.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact Dr. Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184.

By the mark below ("X") I indicate that I understand the nature of the study and I volunteer to participate.

Place an "X" here: _____

Date: _____

***Please return this form with your questionnaire, sealed in the envelope provided.**

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The purpose of this study is to obtain information related to how parental visitation impacts the foster child's behavior and how it can have an effect on the child's placement in the foster care system and the reunification process.

The information you provided will be used by Tricia Lynn Haggerty, MSW student, to complete her research project as part of her graduation requirement for California State University, San Bernardino.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the survey, you may contact Dr. Janet Chang, at (909) 537-5184. If you feel it necessary to discuss any emotional distress or reactions to your participation in this study with a counselor you may contact San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health Resource Center at (909) 421-9200 or Vista Community Counseling at (909) 854-3420. The results of this survey will be available in the Pfau Library, California State University, San Bernardino and with the Department of Children's Services after September 1, 2006.

Please keep this letter for your records.

APPENDIX D
DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic Information

These questions are to obtain information regarding your and your foster child's background. Please circle the number that reflects your answer. Questions 1-8 are regarding you and questions 9-19 are regarding your foster child. If you have more than one foster child, please answer the following questions for only one child between the ages 5-12.

Your responses will remain confidential.

1. What is your gender?
 1. Male
 2. Female
2. What is your age? _____
3. What is your ethnicity?
 1. Caucasian
 2. African-American
 3. Latino/Hispanic
 4. Asian/Pacific Islander
 5. Native American
 6. Other
4. What is your religious background?
 1. Protestant
 2. Catholic
 3. Christian
 4. Judaism
 5. Other
 6. No religion
5. What is the highest grade you have completed?
 1. Less than high school
 2. Some high school
 3. High school graduate or GED
 4. Some college
 5. College graduate
 6. Master's or doctorate degree

6. What is your marital status?
 1. Single
 2. Married
 3. Separated
 4. Divorced
 5. Widow(ed)
 6. Other
7. Are you employed?
 1. Yes
 2. No
8. What is your relation to the child?
 1. No relation
 2. Grandparent
 3. Aunt/Uncle
 4. Other Family member (specify) _____
9. Foster child's age _____
10. What is your foster child's gender?
 1. Male
 2. Female
11. What is your foster child's ethnicity?
 1. Caucasian
 2. African-American
 3. Latino/Hispanic
 4. Asian/Pacific Islander
 5. Native American
 6. Other
12. What is your foster child's religious background?
 1. Protestant
 2. Catholic
 3. Judaism
 4. Christian
 5. Other
 6. No religion

13. What is the current grade your foster child is in?

- | | |
|-----------------|------------|
| 1. No education | 6. Fourth |
| 2. Kindergarten | 7. Fifth |
| 3. First | 8. Sixth |
| 4. Second | 9. Seventh |
| 5. Third | 10. Eighth |

14. What is the length of time that the foster child has been in your home (in months)

15. What is the reason for the foster child's removal from their natural family?

1. Physical abuse
2. Sexual abuse
3. Neglect
4. Abandonment
5. Positive drug screening at birth

16. Does the foster child have visitation with their natural family?

1. Yes
2. No

17. If yes, whom do they visit with?

1. Mother
2. Father
3. Both Father and Mother
4. Siblings
5. Extended family

18. Number of previous foster care placements for the foster child? _____

APPENDIX D
AGENCY LETTER

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

150 South Lea Road • San Bernardino CA 92415-0515



**COUNTY OF SAN BERNARDINO
SOCIAL SERVICES GROUP**

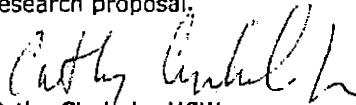
CATHY CIMBALO
Director

December 6, 2005

DR. ROSEMARY MCCASLIN
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY
SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2397

This letter serves as notification to the Department of Social Work at CSUSB that Tricia Haggerty has obtained consent from the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services (DCS) to conduct the research project entitled "Impact of Parental Visitation on the Behavior of Foster Children."

This letter also serves as notification that DCS is giving consent to allow DCS staff to participate in this research project as outlined in the submitted research proposal.


Cathy Cimbalo, MSW
Director

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